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A Trip Down Memory Lane

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Last Christmas, I was unable to come home to Connecticut for Christmas because my border collie, Clementine, had emergency back surgery two days beforehand and the recovery was brief, one month, but intensive, especially in those days immediately after she got home. This summer, I was unable to come home because my Saint Bernard, Ambrose, had a torn ACL the first week of May and the recovery from that surgery was both intensive and not brief. Summer was spent in D.C.

So, yesterday, after a six hour and fifteen minute drive, having made very good time, we pulled into the driveway of the home in which I grew up. Homecomings are always provocative of a range of emotions. No family is without its stresses as well as its blessings and ours is no exception. I am glad to report that my Dad, at age eighty-five, is still going strong, never misses Mass, never missed a UConn women's basketball game, and is always delighted, if a little pressed, to have three dogs running around his normally quiet home.

Our town is a small town, with a population of about 1,700 people, which is about four hundred more than when I was growing up. The center of town no longer has a village green ? the Main Street went down the center of that when it was paved at the beginning of the last century ? but along yards of the many colonial and Victorian homes that line the road, you can still see where the path around the green was lay, and walk your dogs along it. The center of the town is especially beautiful this time of year, with almost all the homes, as well as the 18th century Congregational church putting candles in the windows. Unfortunately, in the past year, our town's General Store closed, shuttering the one commercial business in town, if you do not count antique dealers and farms. Blessedly, our town still lacks a solitary traffic

signal. It is very quiet. I look forward to retiring here some day.

One of the treats of coming home is to peruse my old encyclopedia, the 1970 edition of Compton's. It was designed for students. As a boy, I would fall asleep reading from the encyclopedia and I still can't fall to sleep without a book in my hand. It is fascinating to see how much the world has changed in the intervening 43 years by scouring the pages of Compton's.

For example, here are the opening sentences of one entry appropriate to the season:

Christmas. The most joyous and blessed day of the year is Christmas, December 25, when Christians all over the world celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ. Their thoughts go back to that first Christmas morning, nearly 2,000 years ago, when the newborn Christ Child lay in a manger in the Holy Land. From that humble birthplace, the Child brought new faith and new hope to the world. Simple shepherds and Wise Men alike knelt before the Holy Child in devoted thanks for His birth.

Obviously, this was written in the days before political correctness! (I love the fact that "His" is capitalized!) To their credit, the editors filled out the rest of the entry by discussing the different ways the holiday is celebrated in different countries, and also mentioned the fact that many of the traditional holiday symbols have their routes in pagan solstice festivities. And, they mentioned, too, the fact that our early Puritan forefathers forbid the holiday and it did not attract widespread observance in the United States until the nineteenth century.

One of my favorite entries is for architecture. As a boy I wanted to be an architect but it turned out I was horrible at math, foreclosing that possibility. But, reading the Compton's entry, it explains the key developments in architecture and the photos they use to accompany the text highlight some of same buildings I would want to highlight if I were the editor: the Parthenon in Athens, the Pantheon and Colosseum in Rome, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Sant' Apollinare in Ravenna, Notre Dame du Port in Clermont-Ferrand, the Abbaye-aux-Hommes in Caen, Notre Dame in Paris, Amiens, Salisbury, the Jacques Coeur house in Bourges, the Pazzi chapel in Florence and the Farnese Palace and St. Peter's in Rome. You get the idea. All significant buildings. All beautiful. And, with the exception of the Jacques Coeur house and the Farnese palace, all of them are religious structures. Think about that. For millennia, the most beautiful buildings, but also the best built and therefore most likely to survive the ravages of time, were religious buildings.

Conversely, when you get to the modern era, religion has only two of seven of the entries: The First Presbyterian Church in Stamford, Connecticut and Coventry Cathedral make the grade, alongside the RCA building and Lever House in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax building in Racine, Wisconsin, A building at Wayne State University in Detroit, the Nestle building in Geneva. Admittedly, these modern secular structures are all important and beautiful. But, there is no denying the acids of modernity have eaten away within the field of architecture, and that this was made obvious to an eight year old in 1970.

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I will spend the rest of the week perusing my old encyclopedia. Like walking through the center of town and up the hill to Our Lady of Lourdes church (a Catholic church was not permitted on Main Street in the nineteenth century in Yankee-controlled Hampton!), or strolling along Pine Acres Pond in the state forest a mile from our home, or missing the General Store and its grinders, paging through the pages of my old Compton's brings back memories and also clues to the development of my own intellectual interests. I

suppose kids these days use the computer to access such information. Perhaps Wikipedia is as reliable in its way as my old Compton's was conscious of the sensibilities of middle America in 1970. But, there is nothing in the world like curling up with a good book on a cold Connecticut winter day. This week, more than the busy scurrying, the cooking, the merry making, it is the quiet time I yearn for, much it spent slipping through these old pages along memory lane.

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